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So. Cal approaching total gridlock on freeways

Traffic experts say system needs a total overhaul

By Lisa Mascaro

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Monday, December 29, 2003 - Congestion on Southern California's freeways - already the nation's worst - will intensify and come to a gridlocked halt in just a few years unless dramatic steps are taken, traffic experts say.

They predict a 1.25- percent increase in trips annually through 2006, which may not sound like much. But freeways are already jammed and rush hours are getting longer so Southern Californians are fast approaching the gridlock barrier - the point at which traffic barely moves, no matter what hour of the day.

"It's the drip, drip, drip," said Bob Huddy, a senior transportation manager at the Southern California Association of Governments who is heading up the 101 Freeway expansion plans for the agency.

"Once it gets too much, the system collapses ... It's the last straw that breaks the camel's back."

At a recent SCAG meeting, planners pointed to the traffic tie-ups experienced when bus and train service was interrupted during the recent five-week- long transit strike, and said commuters can expect to see more of the same in coming years.

The Automobile Club of Southern California puts it this way: The number of drivers has nearly doubled statewide over the past 30 years while the miles of roadways have increased just 29 percent.

"It shouldn't be any surprise the congestion we're experiencing. The question is, what do we do?" said Stephen Finnegan, transportation policy specialist at the Auto Club.

"We are at the breaking point at more and more highways - a small increase in trips does lead to congestion. What we don't want is to have the limits of our system impact our economic growth, job creation, quality of life."

Experts have widely circulated their population estimates this year as a wake-up call for transportation planning.

They expect 6 million new residents to the six-county region - Los Angeles, Ventura, Orange, San Bernardino, Riverside and Imperial - by 2030.

Most of that comes from families having kids, rather than new residents moving into the area.

To handle the crunch, SCAG has been reconsidering long- term plans to expand the Ventura (101) Freeway despite protests from residents that killed a widening plan in the spring.

Commuting Southern Californians already spend 90 hours a year in gridlock - the worst in the nation

for the 16th consecutive year, according to this year's annual report from the Texas Transportation Institute, which is based on 2001 data.

In Los Angeles County, that amounts to 1 billion gallons in wasted fuel and \$1,005 per person lost in gridlock.

And a lot of aggravated commuters.

In a past generation, traffic growth was even greater - about 3 percent a year during the 1960s to 1980s - as more women entered the work force and families got a second car, planners said.

Now, SCAG expects an additional 20 million vehicle trips on the region's freeways in coming decades - from 55.2 million in 2000 to 75.7 million by 2030.

That's 1.25 percent annual growth in vehicle trips - 680,000 car trips a year.

Even that seemingly small increase in cars can result in substantial delays as the freeways fail to operate as they should, planners said.

Some freeways will see more stop-and-go traffic, while others already getting gridlock throughout the day may shift the burden to streets, as cars queue up to get into freeway lanes or drivers use streets as an alternate.

"Some freeways like the 101 are already full, so the delay will be felt elsewhere,' Huddy said. "That was one of our problems with the 101. That facility itself may have some serious limitations.'

Finnegan said solutions include building more roads as well as managing existing ones with new technologies that allow systems to run better.

He adds with Southern California's economy on the rebound this year, commuters can only expect traffic to worsen as more workers get back on the job.

SCAG planners are also looking at land-use changes that would concentrate more densely packed communities near freeways and public transit, as well as mixed-use urban villages where residents would have access to shopping and entertainment within walking distance of their homes.

But planners are well aware - after the failed attempt to consider widening the 101 - they need to bring their case for any changes to the residents for support.

"The bottom line is, our population is growing and the number of vehicle trips and vehicle miles traveled is growing,' Finnegan said.

"Clearly, we're behind the 8- ball,' he said. "Because of years of under-investment in our transportation system the growth we're experiencing now is having a greater impact on our ability (to get around). Every year that we don't improve our transportation, we fall that much more behind.'

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